

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

The American Prison Writing Archive

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The United States holds more prisoners and employs more prison staff than any other country on earth. Yet there is no central location where the public, policy makers, activists, students or researchers can learn from the many years of first-hand experience of prisoners and prison workers. *The American Prison Writing Archive* (APWA) is an in-progress, Internet-based, digital archive of non-fiction essays that will offer the public first-hand testimony to the living and working conditions experienced by prisoners, as well as prison employees and volunteers. *Anyone* who lives, works or volunteers inside American prisons can contribute work to the APWA. The APWA seeks authors who write with the authority that only first-person experience can bring.

In separating men and women from their homes and families, restricting their movement, and stripping them of selected civil and property rights, the police, courts, and prisons mete out the violence that law sanctions the state to practice against the state's citizens. Policing, courtroom procedures, and prison practices are thus symptomatic sites for judging any state's legal integrity, its commitment to equal treatment, and its overall moral health. We make these connections without thought wherever camps and prisons emerge under tyrannous configurations of power: judging Stalin by his gulag, The Reich by its death camps, Apartheid by Robben Island, and Iran by Evin. We are certainly right to condemn such regimes. But we do so on the assumption that the full implementation of American legal rights, even-handed police enforcement, and courts that make no practical distinctions based on race or class have effectively isolated the prison from judgments upon the moral integrity of the state. The prisoner thus becomes the rightful victim of his or her own actions – the prison becomes a quarantined space for punishment of private, moral ills, and nothing in this complex bears significance for our assessment of the nation's legal health and democratic integrity. This is the working assumption in the United States today and it is at least forty years out of date. As sociologist Bruce Western observes on page 6 of his book *Punishment and Inequality in America* (Russell Sage, 2006), "Convict status inheres now, not in individual offenders, but in entire demographic categories". In turn, as the essays in the APWA suggest, the violent dysfunction inside American

prisons may be less the effect of whom we lock up than of institutional practices veiled by the sanction of law.

The APWA (like *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America*, 2014, the book project out of which the APWA evolved) seeks to break this quarantine and pull back this veil. Its premise is that American prison writers – like those who have written from Siberia, Auschwitz, South Africa and Tehran – remain our permanent vanguard in understanding whether the violence meted out by the law achieves order in the name, or at the expense, of justice. The APWA will also feature the writings of prison workers because such workers are too easily criticized as the originating sources of suffering among incarcerated people. These workers have life expectancies nearly twenty years short of other Americans and suffer the highest rates of suicide, hypertension, and alcoholism among any sector of law enforcement. Their behaviors are symptomatic of the collateral damage of the prison regime: this regime is organically linked to neoliberal states that offer the working poor prison jobs in lieu of employment in industries encouraged to globalize their search for the cheapest labour markets on earth – the same flight of solid-wage manufacturing jobs that have turned inner cities into employment deserts. Because Americans want mass-incarceration on the cheap, we overcrowd prisons and provide so few staff that staff must operate on a war footing, constantly threatening violence in what is, in effect, the nation's continuing, race- and class-based civil war.

The APWA is open to any testimony about the issues that matter to incarcerated people, prison staff, administrators, teachers and volunteers. The APWA values writing that takes thoughtful, constructive positions even on passionately felt ideas. The APWA is intended for researchers and for the general public, to help them understand American prison conditions and the prison's practical effects and place in society. All the work in the APWA will be open to anyone, anywhere in the world with access to the Internet. The APWA will open the American prison to public observation, and showcase the thinking and writing being produced inside.

Once included in the APWA, work will be featured indefinitely. Contributors can write under pseudonyms or anonymously. The APWA is not currently accepting poetry or fiction. We accept art (on a single 8.5 x 11 inch page) only if accompanied by an essay. *Contributors retain full and unconditional copyright to their work.* There is no deadline. We seek the widest possible gathering of American prison writing and we will read,

scan, and transcribe essays into the APWA on a continuing basis. Previously published work is acceptable if authors retain copyright.

Non-fiction essays, based on first-hand experience, should be limited to 5,000 words (15 double-spaced pages), but there is no limit to the number of essays any single author can contribute. Clearly hand-written pages are welcome. We charge no fees. We will read *all* writing submitted.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information and to download the permissions-questionnaire that must accompany all contributions, go to: <http://www.dhinitiative.org/projects/apwa/>. Mail questionnaires and essays, or write for more information to:

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You can send a request by mail to the same address for the permissions-questionnaire as well.